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*Fairy Tales Reimagined: Essays on New Retellings. Edited by Susan Redington*

*Bobby, Foreword by Kate Bernheimer. North Carolina: McFarland, 2009. 260 pp.*

This collection grew out of an NEMLA conference panel and it displays both the strengths and the weaknesses of its inception. Its large number of essays, sixteen plus a foreword and introduction, precludes any of them from having the length for a complex development of the theses, and I would have loved much more of Bethany Joy Bear on Peg Kerr's 1999 queering of Hans Andersen's *Wild Swans* or the Joanne Campbell Tidwell's reading of Jane Yolen's recuperation of Barrie's *Peter Pan* in her 1997/2000 "Lost Girls," where Peter becomes the patriarch enforcing Victorian heteronormativity and the pirates the revolutionary democratic community. Yolen's story—"Tidwell writes"—"is of the truly oppressed of Victorian times, girls of mostly working class origins, and it restores the revolutionary and emancipatory nature of the tale" (66). Despite the relative brevity of the essays, one of the real strength of the collection is its focus on recent publications of retellings where little criticism has as yet been generated, with stories from the 1990s and 2000 plus. Alongside the new stories, the collection embraces an expansive inclusion of less-considered women writers such as Peg Kerr, Emma Donoghue, Robin McKinley, Louise Murphy, Shannon Hale and, in a genre that Mathilda Slabbert argues is sometimes regarded as "the domain for female writers and the platform for feminist commentary" (69), it is also exciting to find serious consideration of a number of male writers: Robert Coover, Neil Gaiman, Gregory Maguire, Philip Pullman, Gaétan Soucy and Bill Willingham. Indeed, Willingham's comic book series, *Fables* 2002-6, with its cast of fairy-tale figures presented in the 'real' world of New York post 9/11, is one that will be new to large swathes of the fairy-tale academy. Mark C. Hill's analysis of the

representations of masculinity in its protagonist, Bigby Wolf--[p]art hard-nosed detective, part soldier, part anti-hero... he is the embodiment of the villainous wolves of European fairy tales" (181)--is subtle and engaging, concluding that the series mirrors an America that "glorifies war and the soldiers who fight them" (192).

The claims of the collection's sub-headings are a little over-blown and the organization of essays within them at times misleading, but the discussions that circulate around gender and sexuality, representations of emotional trauma, cultural critique and the contemporary retelling of the fairy tale are rich and engaging. Personally I would have liked more focus on the metafictional issues of retelling, given the collection's sub-title, but the essays rarely do that, with the exception of Amie A. Doughty's discussion of Robin McKinley and Helen Pilonovsky's impressive analysis of Kate Bernheimer's *Complete Tales*. It is also a pity that the reference used consistently by the authors is Adrienne Rich's 1972 "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," a useful and interesting argument but a little dated in the twenty-first century for discussion of contemporary and postmodern retelling.

Don't look here for cutting edge theoretical engagement, there is hardly a reference to Bacchilega or Benson (to begin at the 'B's of theoretical tale telling). And the lack of proper dating of the primary texts is a scholarly omission that at times does not allow more useful comparisons. Margarete J. Landwehr compares representations of the Holocaust in Yolen's *Briar Rose* and Murphy's *Hansel and Gretel* as if they were contemporary novels (as indeed her editions imply), but the fact that Yolen's was written a decade before is surely relevant to a comparative reading of retellings? It was frustrating that I constantly had to go outside the volume to discover the original dates for much of the work under discussion. And in her Foreword, Bernheimer's autobiographical musing on the fairy tale raises a fascinating question as to whether it

is 'affect' that unifies the genre in all its many manifestations and retellings. A question which, given that it is the nature of the foreword to be written after all the essays have been composed, is sadly not addressed in this volume, but certainly deserves further consideration.

What you do get in *Fairy Tales Reimagined* is a collection of detailed and interesting readings of contemporary writers using the fairy tale as part of their novels, short stories and poems. This is a collection to whet the appetite and send you off to read the books as yet unknown to you. Martine de la Rochère's analysis of Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch*, with its dramatizations of "the passing of intimate experience, painful secrets and unofficial knowledge between women" (16) is a good case in point. The more canonical writers are included alongside the less critically known: Kate Bernheimer, A.S. Byatt, Robert Coover, Philip Pullman, Anne Sexton and Jeanette Winterson, are writers we are familiar with but the texts chosen do tend to be their later works where critical analysis is all the more welcome. Pullman's 2000 *I was a Rat!* for example, is a revision of the Cinderella story from the viewpoint of a boy not returned to his original genus on the stroke of midnight. Maureen Torpey explores Winterson's 2001 *Powerbook* as a rewriting of Alice both in Wonderland and through the Looking Glass, and the critical reading will send me back to a text I know well, anew. Most of the articles are good and a few are very good indeed. The collection delivers an engaged and comprehensive discussion of contemporary writers utilizing the fairy tales metatextually. I suggest that the collection is essential for the institutional library, and it will be a welcome addition to many individual libraries as well.

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